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SUBJECT: CRA EXPLAINS DELAYS IN IMPLEMENTING RELIGION LAW IN THE NORTH

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B) HANOI 273
C) HANOI 150
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Summary

¶1. (SBU) On June 14, Poloff met with the GVN Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) and discussed delays in the registration of religious congregations in the North and Northwest Highlands and aspects of the spread of Protestantism among ethnic minority communities. CRA, which has operational responsibility for implementation of the GVN's Legal Framework on Religion established in 2004 and 2005, told us that the GVN was purposely proceeding more cautiously in the North as Protestantism is "newer" there. CRA is concerned about potential conflict between ethnic minority traditionalists and recent Christian converts and the stability of family life in largely rural communities. CRA's "roadmap" in the North, therefore, focuses first on further training of district and provincial-level officials and then registration of congregations of the nationally recognized Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN). In a third phase, the GVN will register non-ECVN congregations. Despite this long-term plan, our CRA interlocutors emphasized that families are now allowed to practice "non-registered" religions freely in their homes.

¶2. (SBU) While we are concerned about the GVN maintaining its momentum in legalizing and registering religious groups, we see no backpedaling on religious freedom nor a lack of commitment at the national level. We believe the trend in the North, and nationwide, remains largely positive. Numbers of congregation registrations and religious denomination recognition certificates continue to grow, and the emphasis on training of provincial authorities is a good one. End summary.

Meeting had Protestantism Focus

¶3. (SBU) On June 14, Poloff met with Dang Tai Tinh, Director of the International Cooperation Department and Tran Manh Hung, Deputy Director of the Protestantism Department of the GVN Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA). The purpose of the meeting was to get an update on recent religious developments and to discuss delays in registration, under the GVN Legal Framework on Religion procedures, of religious congregations in the North and Northwest Highlands. CRA focused its discussion on Protestant organizations. Although we tried to raise some of the issues surrounding Buddhist organizations in Vietnam at this meeting, the CRA officials suggested we discuss such issues on another occasion.

Recent Religious Developments

¶4. (SBU) CRA interlocutors told Poloff that the GVN has now "nationally recognized" the Baha'i Faith in Vietnam. (Note: "national recognition" is the highest level of GVN approval given after one year of national level registration and certification of religious activities End note.) In terms of the rapid growth of Protestantism in Vietnam, CRA said that there are approximately one million Protestants in Vietnam and the GVN officially recognizes two Protestant organizations at a national level - the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) and the larger and older Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV). National-level recognition is now pending for three other Protestant organizations - the United World Mission Church, the Seventh Day Adventists and the General Baptist Conference. CRA told us that this should occur in early 2008 when the GVN gives final approval to the groups' respective management boards and they have completed one year of operation under their respective national level registrations.

¶5. (SBU) Hung said that currently the CRA is providing instructions to the following five religious organizations so that they can register nationally, as opposed to local-level registration: the Christian Inter-Fellowship Church; the Pentecostal Church; the Baptist Church; the Mennonite Church; and the Presbyterian Church. Once these denominations complete their registration procedures, they will be granted a national certificate of religious operation/activities. One year later, the GVN will review and consider whether to officially recognize these denominations (as required by the 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief).

Update on the Central Highlands

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¶6. (SBU) CRA divides Vietnam into three geographic zones - the South, the Central Highlands, and the North, including the Northwest Highlands. In terms of the Central Highlands, CRA reports that since the 2004 establishment of the Legal Framework on Religion, there are 849 total Protestant congregations, of which eighty percent are registered. According to CRA, there have been nine churches built and 30,000 bibles printed in the Ede ethnic language. Tinh told us this progress took several years to achieve in the Central Highlands, an area in which Protestantism is more entrenched than in the North.

Factors to Consider in the North

¶7. (SBU) Our CRA interlocutors emphasized that the registration of congregations in the North will take more time and resources as Protestants further integrate into the communities there. Tinh pointed out that Protestantism is "much newer in the North" and most of the Protestants in the North are ethnic Hmong, who have a strong "cultural heritage" and traditions. The CRA is very concerned about "conflict" both within individual families and among families in villages and communes - between converted Christian believers and traditional ancestor worshippers. He said this can often happen between parents and children and tear the family life apart.

¶8. (SBU) Tinh told us the GVN is very concerned about preserving unity and integrity in Vietnam, and that in order for the GVN to ensure religious freedom, "we must look at preserving stability and protecting traditions." He said the GVN will take specific steps to avoid "bad interactions" between "believers" and "non-believers" in the North.

¶9. (SBU) He added that the GVN sees other "security issues" around groups and sects from the South coming to recruit in the North. With this in mind, CRA has developed a "roadmap" for proceeding with further implementation of the legal framework in the North. First,

CRA will register ECVN-affiliated congregations. Following that, they will support registrations in the North for groups that are "recognized in the South." Finally, registrations will be processed for "non-recognized organizations." In the interim, CRA emphasized to Poloff that all religious groups, registered or unregistered, are allowed to "practice their religion freely in their homes." Tinh told us there are 300 non-ECVN-affiliated Protestant groups nationwide.

¶10. (SBU) CRA cites 45 Protestant congregations registered in the North since adoption of the Legal Framework in 2004. A total of 31 congregations had been registered by the end of 2006, and 14 since January 1, 2007. In order to speed up the pace of ECVN registrations, CRA has been planning more training sessions for district and provincial level officials, where there still appears to be some confusion on procedures. CRA told us they plan 41 more training sessions in the North by the end of the year.

Vatican Relations Progressing Like Molasses

¶11. (SBU) On the subject of Vietnam-Vatican relations, Tinh was not forthcoming. The Vietnam-Vatican relationship is "growing," and both governments have agreed to "establish a working committee" to further promote the relationship. He would not commit to a definite date when this "committee" will begin its work. When asked why the GVN rejected two Vatican-endorsed bishopric nominees earlier this year (Ref. A), Tinh said only that this was an "internal matter" between the two governments.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Despite some defensive comments and delays on registrations in the North, the trend on religious freedom and implementation of the Legal Framework on Religion in the North continues to be largely positive. Although we cannot confirm all the statistics, the number of registrations is slowly increasing and the emphasis on the training of local authorities should help eliminate local obstacles. While we remain concerned about any GVN excuses for delays, we do not see any national-level lack of commitment to or "backpedaling" on religious freedom and implementation of the Legal Framework on Religion in Vietnam. We expect the situation in the North to continue its gradual improvement. End comment.

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